Syria in its fifth year of civil war

Overview, analysis and thoughts on resolving the conflict

by Christian-Peter Hanelt

After the First World War, the then colonial powers Great Britain and France created a number of countries from what remained of the Ottoman Empire. One of those countries was Syria, a nation of artificial borders. In 1946, Syria gained its independence. The government promoted secularization and saw to it that the benefits of modernization accrued to many, which meant that the country's 12 different ethnic and religious groups lived together in peace until the 1980s. During the Assad dynasty, however, problems and conflicts arose, culminating in open revolt in 2011.

Corruption and nepotism made it possible for a small number of Syrians to accumulate great wealth. One clan has had a monopoly on political power for a long time: the Assad and Makhlouf families, who belong to the country's Shiite Alawite minority. Both are supported by an apparatus consisting of the military and secret police, and by allies Iran and Russia. Conversely, 50 percent of Syrians are younger than 20 and have few prospects of finding a job or enjoying economic prosperity. In addition, the country has experienced a long period of drought and an economic crisis, which have led to poverty among the rural population and in Syria's midsized cities, a majority of whose inhabitants are Sunnis.

Syria's civil war began in 2011 with peaceful mass demonstrations, first in remote areas, then in the major cities of Damascus and Aleppo. One of the main demands made by the protesters was political and economic inclusion. The Assad regime quelled the demonstrations using force. The situation escalated into a national civil war which has since become a staging ground for political rivalries between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, on the one hand, and between the US and Russia, on the other. Against this background, all attempts by the United Nations to negotiate a peace have failed.

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Since the civil war erupted at least 250,000 people have been killed in Syria, most of them by Assad's troops and secret police and by the so-called Islamic State (IS). Twelve million people – approximately half of Syria's population – are displaced. Of those, eight million are still in Syria and four million have fled to the neighboring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, and to nearby regions under Kurdish control. Tens of thousands are fleeing to Europe. The United Nations only has 6 euros, instead of 30, to spend on each refugee in the overfilled camps each day. Poverty and the lack of a future in the camps are the main reasons why Syrians are now trying to get to Europe.

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Large parts of Syria have now been destroyed. The World Bank estimates it will cost €147 billion to rebuild the country. For all intents and purposes, the collapsing nation currently consists of four areas: the section ruled by the Assad regime; the "Islamic State" which was created by IS and which extends into Iraq; areas under Kurdish control; and areas autonomously held by various rebel groups.

Intense fighting is taking place on the different fronts. Cynical calculations inform events on the ground: While Assad largely deploys barrel bombs, condemned by the international community, against the country's civilians but spares IS-held areas, Kurds and secular rebels are attempting to fight the Islamists. They, in turn, are terrorizing the population through acts of unimaginable violence and are systematically destroying priceless cultural treasures.

Since no support was forthcoming for more moderate and secular opposition groups and for the Free Syrian Army (FSA), combatants have joined radical Islamist groups such as IS, Al Nusra and Ahrar al-Scham. Assad's militias are being supported militarily, logistically and financially by Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Lebanon's Hezbollah. At the same time, western nations are arming Kurdish peshmerga forces to combat IS militants and are carrying out aerial attacks on IS sites. Recently, Russia launched a military and diplomatic offensive in support of the Assad regime, although it is not fighting IS as much as it is attacking opposition-held areas from the air.

The Islamic State's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Syrian dictator Assad should in fact be charged with crimes against humanity at the UN's International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Rivalries complicate finding a solution

A number of states are pursuing diametrically opposed goals in Syria. Saudi Arabia is attempting to strengthen the Sunni majority in the country and roll back Iran's influence in the region. Conversely, Teheran is siding with the Shiite minority (the Alawites). Syria is also of key importance to Iran since the routes supplying Hezbollah in Lebanon run directly through the country. The US, in turn, does not want to be drawn into the civil war, but does want to support its allies Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia while curtailing Iran's and Russia's power in the region. On the other hand, it is Moscow's intention to be seen as an equal partner to Washington by shaping developments in the Middle East, maintaining a major military presence in the region, supporting dictatorships of the sort found in Syria and, in light of the Islamists also present in Russia, fighting IS. Finally, the Turkish government wants to prevent the Kurds from getting any closer to establishing a state in the region, while some Kurdish groups are, in turn, being supplied with weapons by European countries and the US.

One tragic aspect is that the European Union has the least political and diplomatic influence in Syria, but, along with Syria's neighbors, is bearing the greatest financial and humanitarian burden of the country's civil war. In contrast, Moscow, Teheran and Riyadh are fueling the conflict but are hardly affected by the ensuing flow of refugees.

What might a successful solution look like?

Ending the conflict in Syria will be extremely difficult. Relatively few peaceful solutions exist. Here are a number of suggestions:

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Technical and financial support for UNCHR, the UN's refugee agency, is essential for reducing the suffering of Syria's civilian population in the short term. This means assisting with the creation of schools and vocational training facilities in its camps.

Western nations must also provide meaningful political, diplomatic and financial support to Syria's secular opposition, something that cannot be left to Saudi Arabia and Qatar alone.

In addition, Syrian cities and towns in the country's north and south that are governed by moderate opposition and civil society groups must finally be protected from the Assad regime's deadly aerial barrel-bomb attacks and the attacks carried out by IS on the ground. This will only be possible through the creation of "buffer zones." Over time, model cities could be established there to provide hope and encourage Syrians to return home.

Finally, the diplomatic momentum generated by the Iranian nuclear agreement should be used to get Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey involved in jointly finding a solution to the conflict. There can be no peace in Syria without rapprochement between Teheran and Riyadh. At the same time, the EU and US should strengthen their relations with Turkey so they can exert greater influence on Ankara's policies towards Syria and the Kurds.

The chances that diplomacy will work are currently fading, however, since the conflict between Kurdish groups and the Turkish government is growing, and since Moscow and Teheran are aggressively intervening militarily on behalf of Assad in order to redraw the battle lines in their favor. The stage is thus set for ongoing warfare and suffering and for the displacement of even more Syrians.

Further reading

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